



# AGROECOLOGY PARTNERSHIP



## DELIVERABLE D7.8

Conceptual framework of the methodology to identify and engage actors and stakeholders of the value chain to promote the development of new and existing AELs.

*Factsheet*



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## 1. Identifying and engaging key value chain actors and stakeholders in the development of new LLs

Agroecology Living Labs (AELs) are transformative real-life settings designed to activate local priorities and perspectives, promoting co-creation of knowledge and driving agri-food system changes. AELs are indeed considered tools to emphasize direct engagement of local actors and perspectives through a research-to-action approach, standing the role of all the stakeholders in activating effective transformative change at the agri-food system level.

In the AELL, the research process is then conducted with the direct collaboration of representatives of the community of a territory, going beyond the vision of the community as the 'subject' of research and taking a step forward to multi-actor activities with the goal of shared leadership in which the final decision-making process is at the community level (empowerment). The AELs integrate, indeed, a participatory action research (PAR) approach: i) recognizing the authority of direct experience, ii) learning from this experience to co-construct new knowledge (i.e., knowledge in action), iii) considering the research as a transformative process, with the process being as important as the outcomes, iv) basing collaboration on the dialogue and v) aiming to produce knowledge about means-end relationships that not only advances theoretical understanding but also offers practical value for solving real-world problems (design knowledge).

Identifying the scale of action and the stakeholders to be engaged as actors in the AELs are the starting challenges. The aim of this factsheet is to introduce the methodology designed to identify and onboard stakeholders along the value chain, establishing new AELs or strengthening existing ones.

### 1.1 The value chain context

The value chain represents the core section of the agri-food system where the agroecology transition can be activated. In the context of agroecology transition, the value chain represents a territorially focused operational framework for engaging with different actors, e.g. farmers, retailers, consumers or policymakers. Territorial value chains often emerge from cooperative efforts and are essential for linking agricultural products with social, cultural, and ecological values. The aim of analysing the value chain is to identify how to enhance the value of agricultural products beyond their mere monetary value status and to include social, cultural and ecological values in supply chains that link products and territory (Atta-Krah et al., 2021). Such analysis also considers the social relations along the value chain (Sodero et al., 2021). Understanding the value chain allows: i) identification of impact pathways and innovation opportunities; ii) analysis of external factors such as policies, regulations, and institutional environments; iii) identifying the community of stakeholders to be engaged as actor in the AELL establishment and/or evolution over time.

### 1.2 Beyond the value chain concept

From an agri-food systems perspective, the value chain concept, normally represented as linear, is not sufficient since all linkages, relationships and connections among actors and components of the system are not adequately represented. In the perspective of activating an agroecology transition through the engagement of the stakeholders throughout the food value chain, this separation could be overcome, moving towards the phases of the agri-food value chain (namely: production, processing, distribution, retail, consumption) and their interconnections.

Moreover, beside the value chain there are external factors that can hinder or enhance the functioning of the chain. These are the authorities (national and local authorities, research agencies etc.), and institutions (policies, regulations and practices), which impact on the “enabling environment” factors



including the power relationships, economic resources and benefit distribution, rules and principles, and the service providers (e.g., the business and extension services) that support the value chain operations and influence the flow of the information/innovations between the stakeholders.

## 2. The methodology

The activity of designing the methodology aims to: i) align the methodologies with agroecological principles to maximize impact of the AELL in activating/carrying out transformative actions of the agri-food system; ii) ensure adaptability and flexibility for different geographical, cultural and social contexts; iii) leverage partnerships to support capacity building and knowledge sharing

The methodology follows a "Where? Who? Why? What? How? When?" approach based on a three-step process: A) definition of context and identification of the operational scale; B) characterisation of the operational scale by the definition of types of actors and stakeholders; C) analysis and engagement.

- Step A: each AELL origins by a group of actors (research group, grassroots initiative, associations, local rural development groups, etc.) interested in addressing a specific challenge. This step involves: i) defining the territorial context and the operational scale (OS), strictly depending on what the initial challenges were that led to the aggregation of the initial core group of actors; ii) performing a simplified context analysis to understand structural and social dynamics and prioritizing interventions as entry points for the development of the AELL.
- Step B: characterising the OS is an iterative process, closely linked to the actors actually engaged. It includes: i) mapping the value chain, identifying key actors and understanding their roles; ii) redefining boundaries to reflect connections and relationships.
- Step C: it focuses on engaging the actors in the co-creative living lab approach to an agroecology transition. This step is crucial for making informed decisions about who to involve, for what purpose, and how to effectively engage them in the co-creation process; the participatory action research (PAR) framework is enhanced with a design-led perspective to better facilitate stakeholder interactions in the AELL.

Key features of the methodology are: inclusivity and equity (prioritize marginalized groups to address power imbalances and gender issues); participative approach (engage stakeholders throughout the process, from context definition to implementation); practical tools (provide adaptable methodologies and tools for use across diverse contexts); dialog mechanisms (continuously refine the approach through pilot testing and dialog with the stakeholders). With reference to the last point, pilot studies (called pilot experiences) are identified to test and refine the methodology.

## 3. The factsheet

The factsheet synthesises the conceptual framework for a common methodology of identifying and engaging actors and stakeholders of the value chain to promote the development of new and existing AELLS. It is completed by the glossary of the basic terminology reported in the factsheet.



Agroecology Living Lab (AELL)

# Guidelines for engaging value chain stakeholders as actors

The Agroecology Partnership, funded by Horizon Europe, is dedicated to fostering a sustainable, resilient, and farmer-friendly agriculture sector, tackling climate change, biodiversity loss, and food security. Agroecology incorporates farmers' knowledge to address diverse challenges. Through Living Labs (LLs) and Research Infrastructures (RIs), the partnership expedites the transition to agroecology.



## Key Information

**WP 7: Expanding the capacities of LLs and RIs**

Task 7.3: European partnership accelerating farming systems transition: agroecology living labs and research infrastructures

WP lead: Aarhus University (AU) – Thuenen Institute

Task lead: Council for agricultural research and the economics (CREA) – Aarhus University (AU)

## Mission

To provide a step-by-step methodology for engaging a broad set of stakeholders of the expanded agri-food value chain in already existing AELLs, and in promoting the development of new ones

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## The value chain context

How to enhance the value of agricultural products beyond their mere monetary value and to include in the supply chains the social, cultural and ecological values that link products, people and territory.

## Basic paradigm

Aimed to i) guide the development of the AELL and the involvement of stakeholders as actors in the process;

ii) provide a participatory tool for the self-determination of AELL participants

Q	key feature	Q	key feature
What?	Expected innovation	Why?	Real problems
Where?	Real-life setting	How?	Multi-method approach
Who?	Social component	When?	Iterative process

### Step A - define

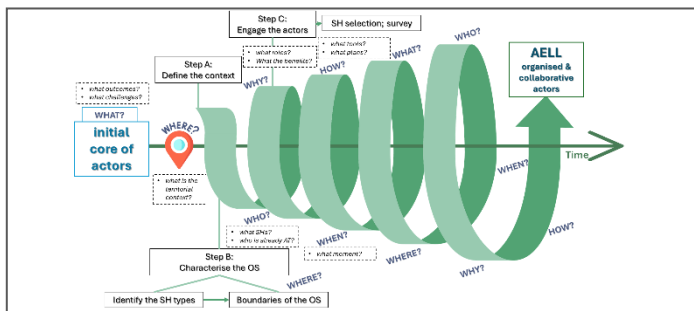
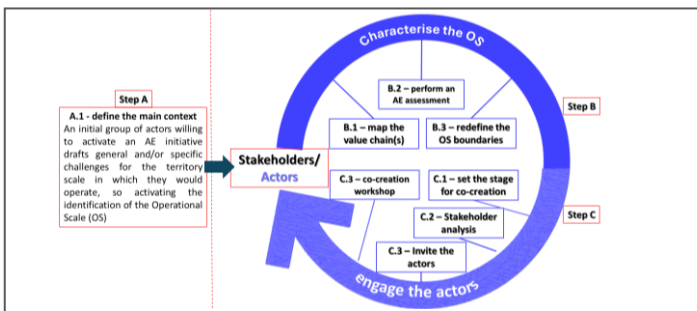
- Define the main context: the Operational Scale (OS) of the AELL is identified starting from a core group of actors interested to face a specific challenge.
- Perform a simplified context analysis: a) to describe the Operational Scale from a structural and internal dynamics perspective, b) to contribute to the prioritisation of interventions and potential programme entry points for the development of the AELL

### Step B - characterise

- Map the value chain: identify the stakeholder typologies and the phases of the value chain following the journey of the product(s).
- Assess the agroecology principles: to identify what already exists in terms of agroecological practices and principles and how important they are for Value Chain operations.
- Shape the Operational Scale: the boundaries of the operational scale can be re-defined through the engaged actors

### Step C - engage

- Set the stage for co-creation: elaborate with the actor's core group the main AELL challenges.
- Perform a stakeholder analysis: map roles, experiences, motivations and the ambitions in the OS and start defining the governance.
- Invite the actors: group stakeholders and perform interviews to identify expectations and prioritise the challenges.
- Run a co-creation workshop: first plenary and kick-off the AELL.



<h4>User-friendly methodology</h4> <p>A glossary will accompany the methodology to aid understanding and establish a common terminology.</p>	<h4>Flexible methodology</h4> <p>The methodology is conceived to be flexible and adaptable to different contexts and scales.</p>	<h4>Continuous update</h4> <p>The methodology will be applied in pilot experiences to collect feedback and test the implementation in real world.</p>
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### 3.1 The glossary

The present glossary reports the basic terminology used in the factsheet. An extended version is provided together with the first version of the methodology in mid 2025.

- **Agri-food system:** all the interconnected activities and actors involved in getting food from field to fork. It encompasses a wide range of components that work together to ensure food security, nutrition, economic viability, and environmental sustainability.
- **Value chain:** “the sequence of interlinked agents and markets that transforms inputs and services into products with attributes that consumers are prepared to purchase” (Devaux et al., 2017). It includes also the procurement of raw materials and other inputs (Webber and Labaste, 2010) and in its largest meaning, it can include also the consumers and the entities working on final disposal of waste after use (Kaplinsky and Morris, 2001). The concept of the value chain as linear is debated from an agroecological perspective.
- **Stakeholders:** individuals, groups, or entities that have a direct or indirect role and vested interest in the objectives, execution, and assessment of a program or intervention. They have the potential to influence the context in which they are involved.
- **Actors:** individuals (e.g., farmers, traders, experts) or entities (e.g., cooperatives, rural development agencies, teaching and research institutions) capable of making decisions and engaging in social networking to achieve an even bigger transformation in systems, and in particular socio-economic systems. They play roles influenced by social norms and values, and their actions are driven by objectives and incentives shaped by their particular socio-economic environments. Actors are stakeholders who, in a specific context and scale, participate directly in the action of transition or transformation towards the definition of new systems. The difference between actors and stakeholders is primarily participation. Actors play an active role in the procurement process, while stakeholders play a more passive role. Actors are also stakeholders because of the benefits they derive from the use of public goods and services (Lynch & Angel, 2013).
- **Operational scale:** It defines the geographic, environmental, and socio-economic boundaries within which an initiative, such as an Agroecology Living Lab (AELL), operates. This scale ensures that the activities are representative and applicable to the broader region, facilitating effective implementation and scalability of sustainable practices. (McPhee et al., 2021).

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